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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 001764

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: AOUN CLAIMS TO DROP OUT OF PRESIDENTIAL
RACE

REF: BEIRUT 1762

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b)
and (d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

1. (C) With the petulance of a sullen teenager who didn't get his way and whose unique genius is underappreciated, Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun says he is bowing out of the presidential race, although he has yet (as of 11/9) to make an official announcement. He reportedly told his MPs and March 8 allies they were free to vote for whichever candidate could provide a solution to Lebanon's problems, if such a candidate exists. Whether Aoun's surrender is genuine or merely the latest in what he probably sees as quickly vanishing scenarios for his ascendance to Baabda Palace, his unexpected move will at a minimum probably lead to another postponement of parliament's electoral session and, more generally, significantly alter the course of the election. Abdicating responsibility for what would happen in a Lebanon without him at the helm, Aoun refused to consider fall-back positions to promote the policies he advocates. By rejecting any role for himself in determining Lebanon's next cabinet and government program, he seems to be hinting at sustaining his spoiler position that any March 14-dominated institution is illegitimate and unrepresentative. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

AOUN WILL SUPPORT CONSENSUS,
BUT WILL NOT PLAY A ROLE IN IT

2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, met with Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun and his advisor (and son-in-law) Gebran Bassil at Aoun's residence in Rabieh on November 9. The Ambassador tried to engage a subdued Aoun in a discussion of recent efforts by the French to convince the Patriarch to name candidates. Commenting (after searching for the English word) only on the Patriarch's "enigmatic" nature, Aoun said he would support any consensus that was reached, but he would not play a role in it.

3. (C) The Ambassador explained his analysis that, based on

the current line-up of candidates and the different positions of Samir Geagea and Walid Jumblatt (who would only accept Nassib Lahoud or Boutros Harb), Saad Hariri (who was looking for a compromise), the Patriarch (who was advocating weak candidates like Joseph Torbey, whom Speaker Nabih Berri probably would exclude), and Berri himself (who probably could accept a "middle" candidate like Robert Ghanem), the only names where there was any hope of consensus -- in the current state of play, which could change at any moment -- were Torbey and Ghanem. With Berri a stronger player than the Patriarch, the road seemed to point to Ghanem, if one excluded the half-plus-one option still favored by Jumblatt and Geagea. What would this mean for the Christians, the Ambassador asked, given that Ghanem is not considered to be a Maronite "heavyweight."

AOUN DOESN'T WANT TO PLAY ANY MORE

¶4. (C) Aoun's response came as a surprise: he personally was no longer interested in being a candidate. The president, he said, must reflect the largest political spectrum possible and have a solution to the country's imminent problems. If March 14 has this candidate, fine, but as he had told majority leader Saad Hariri during their meetings in Paris, he would not be part of it; the presidency is not the issue, it's the larger issues we face. Don't count on me, he reportedly said. I don't care about the presidency, I care about a solution for the country. I'm not seeking another title either, he said, it's time to do something else. Other candidates care more about personal ambitions -- I wish them luck.

'FREEING' HIZBALLAH FOR SOMEONE ELSE

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¶5. (C) The Ambassador noted that this was similar to Druse leader Walid Jumblatt's position, when he said he wouldn't block a consensus candidate but wouldn't vote in favor either. Jumblatt doesn't have my weight, Aoun retorted. I developed trust with Hizballah in an effort to find a peaceful solution. I won't transfer this confidence to someone else. Furthermore, he said, he "freed" Hizballah to support someone else. Hizballah had supported him in recognition of his position (presumably as leader claiming the most Christian support), but he told them they did not owe him anything and they should support whichever candidate represents them best. There was never an understanding regarding the presidency, he claimed.

¶6. (C) Aoun, claiming he was more March 14 than many from March 14, said he did not need to defend himself. I want to be neutral, he claimed, saying he was not March 8; they forced him there. He had tried to build national support by finding a way to rein in Hizballah, but his attempts were misunderstood and now seemed like a bad move. Maybe I didn't convince people, he said, if so, I assume the responsibility. Let Samir Geagea and Walid Jumblatt figure out to make Lebanon free and independent, he said, predicting that, with Aoun out of the picture, Hariri would need a minimum of understanding with Hizballah to avoid a confrontation.

¶7. (C) What have you told your MPs, the Ambassador asked. That they have no responsibility, they are free to do as they choose, Aoun responded. The Ambassador remarked that Hizballah, taking Aoun at his word, might use its "freedom" to drag out the process and prevent the formation of a new government, through sit-ins or other means. Deflecting repeated questions, Aoun and Bassil would not provide any analysis on Hizballah's intentions.

AOUN REPRISSES HIS MARTYRDOM ROLE

¶8. (C) I have the support of the Lebanese people, Aoun continued, but everything is against me: the electoral law, the constitutional court, even former French President Chirac was working against me, so I struggled alone, he said. I'm trying to serve my country; if they don't want me, fine. Maybe the Patriarch will fill the vacuum left by my departure, he said, noting that "all of France" had gone to see the Patriarch. (Note: A trip to Rabieh was omitted from visiting French presidential envoy Claude Gueant's November 9 agenda. Aoun's explanation was that Gueant was not meeting with candidates. End note).

¶9. (C) Responding to the Ambassador's remark that Aoun's departure from the political scene would leave a vacuum in the Christian leadership, Bassil, referring to the 2005 parliamentary elections, responded that the Christians had made their choice for the first time in history (by voting for Aoun), but were then denied commensurate representation in parliament and denied cabinet seats.

X'S, LIES, AND VIDEO CONFERENCE

¶10. (C) It's not a question of names for me, he said, it's numbers. Opening up a copy of al-Balid newspaper to a cartoon picturing various candidates and their alleged support, Aoun melodramatically drew a black "x" across his own picture, noting that he was attributed 56 percent of popular support compared to 0.33 for Robert Ghanem. Yet people were talking about Robert Ghanem and not him for the presidency, proving the bankruptcy of the current Lebanese political system.

¶11. (C) Launching into his favorite theme (corruption), Aoun said he'd rather be defeated than compromise -- everyone is paid, he said, we have to confront corruption. I'm tired of all the humiliating attacks against me, he said; it's lies, lies, lies all the time! The Ambassador noted that he could very well extract a different kind of price than money. Aoun has a legitimate following. He has MPs and advisors who have stuck with him. He has articulated a program that includes important steps such as electoral reform. Surely he could parlay his withdrawal from the presidential race by securing some policy platforms and ministerial positions

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consistent with his goals. Aoun said that he was not interested.

¶12. (C) Noting that Aoun had scheduled a press conference following the meeting, the Ambassador asked whether he planned to announce publicly his withdrawal from the race. Bemused by the thought that the media would attribute his decision to the Ambassador's meeting, Aoun replied in the negative. He would, however, tell the press that he would congratulate anyone who has the solution to Lebanon's problems. (Note: for whatever reason, and despite the gathering of media representatives at Aoun's residence by the time the Ambassador left, Aoun canceled his 11/9 media appearance. End note.)

COMMENT

¶13. (C) Just hours after hearing PM Siniora's accounts of another depressed presidential hopeful, General Michel Sleiman (reftel), we unexpectedly find Aoun claiming to throw in the towel as well. Whether this news is as good as it seems -- that two non-March 14 candidates seem to have surrendered during the same week -- remains to be seen. Although Aoun has not yet (as of 11/9) made a public announcement, we can already imagine the reaction of the inner circle of Aoun supporters: their cult-like, blind devotion undimmed, they will speak in breathless, hushed admiration about Aoun's selflessness in putting nation above ambition. Aoun's actual motivation, we guess, is exactly the

reverse.

¶14. (C) By purporting to withdraw, Aoun can absolve himself from blame for any ensuing chaos (and evade any punishment under U.S. sanctions), instead pointing his finger at the March 14 leaders who had the temerity to ignore his popular backing. Then, if all goes as planned (and in a strategy similar to what Sleiman is probably contemplating), Aoun might be called back into the fray as the only candidate with popular support able to set things straight. His incessant self-pity suggests he is setting himself as the only selfless soul with Lebanon's best interests at heart. Aoun (like Sleiman) might benefit from the perception of being a savior in times of crisis.

¶15. (C) Aoun's total abdication from any responsibility for Lebanon's Christians also is interesting. Either he is actually as despondent as he sounds, or -- more likely -- he is counting on his supporters' growing resentment against those who have caused Aoun to retreat, in the hopes of using this resentment to his advantage. He is probably calculating that he can maintain Christian populist support by hammering on the themes of marginalization and victimhood. By not participating in the elections or in the cabinet or in the development of the cabinet program -- despite March 14's willingness to include him as a key decision maker, just not "king" -- he also reserves the right to declare the presidency and the new cabinet illegitimate and unrepresentative. He can, in this way, maintain sufficient popular support to make political life miserable for those inside the government. He is, at this point, accustomed to playing a role as spoiler and outsider.

¶16. (C) In addition, by appearing benevolent in "freeing" Hizballah from supporting his candidacy, he preserves the unholy alliance that gives him prominence and power beyond his Christian base. Aoun can now persist in deluding his followers that Hizballah would have voted for him, an illusion Hizballah will want to help perpetuate. Had Aoun stayed in the presidential race and Hizballah MPs moved (as expected) to a compromise figure, it would have been obvious that Hizballah exploited Aoun to give national cover to Hizballah's tactics. Now, Hizballah MPs will not face such a dilemma, and each side can happily maintain an alliance that serves both -- and that will undoubtedly prove to be an irritant to the next cabinet as it was to the Siniora government. Nabih Berri, in fact, mentioned in passing to us a few days earlier that Hizballah may sit out the next cabinet. This is a significant remark in light of Aoun's purported withdrawal: might Hizballah and Aoun continue intimidating and crippling the legitimate institutions through ongoing tactics like the sit-in?

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¶17. (C) We will wait to for Aoun's public announcement before soliciting analysis from our contacts, lest we be accused of being the source of news leaks. But we met quietly with Mohamad Chatah, senior advisor to PM Siniora, and Ghattas Khoury, advisor to Saad Hariri, separately on 11/9 to brief them. We urged that March 14 step up its contacts with Aoun bloc MPs and advisors. If there is going to be a presidential election and cabinet formation without any input from Aoun himself, then Aoun's deputies and advisors should be courted. The more people from Aoun's bloc who participate in elections and the cabinet, the less credible become the Aoun claims that the solutions are illegitimate. While Aoun (despite his rhetoric that he is interested in solutions rather than the presidency) rejects any involvement in governing institutions unless he is president, we suspect that many of those around him would welcome other options, once it becomes clear that Aoun is no longer a presidential candidate.

FELTMAN